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A little over a month ago the University of Arizona's Athletics Department broke ground on Arizona Stadium's north end zone addition. According to sources, the extension to the current facility is on track for completion in August 2013. The outside concrete shell will be completed sometime in the summer of 2012, and seats may be in place for the upcoming football season, but fans will not be able to occupy those seats during the 2012 season because important facility needs, restrooms, elevators, and other internal finishes will take another year to complete.

North End Stadium Expansion Necessary to Stay Competitive In Pac-12

According to Steve Kozachik, Associate Director of Athletics and Capital Projects, the end zone project has been part of Arizona's master plan since the time of Jim Livengood, but Greg Byrne made it *the* priority when he was named Arizona's athletic director in May, 2010. "Jim's philosophy was to keep everyone in the same building, (McKale), as he felt it helped with esprit de corps, but when Greg arrived, it was obvious that we just didn't have that luxury anymore," Kozachik said.

The North End Zone expansion will not only be a welcome addition that projects a more professional appearance to Arizona Stadium, but an essential element to help the Wildcats stay competitive in a conference that features five schools that have or will soon complete either rebuilds or significant upgrades to their present football facilities.

Pac-12 Stadium Upgrades

Consider that California will begin their 2012 season in a virtually new Memorial Stadium, completely retrofit to current seismic standards, at a cost of over \$320 million. Just across the bay, Stanford rebuilt their entire stadium, finished in 2006, reducing the capacity from over 80,000 to a more manageable 50,000 with upgraded fan amenities.

Washington will play their 2012 season at Century Link Field while Husky Stadium is upgraded with over \$300 million in improvements, including the removal of the track, lowering the playing field by four feet, and a total enclosure of the end zone by Lake Washington.

To stay more competitive with their Oregon cousins, Oregon State has an expansion plan that will take Reser Stadium from a capacity of just over 45,000, to over 55,000 in the next few years, creating a horseshoe shaped stadium.

The hiring of Bryne as Arizona Athletic Director initiated a more aggressive approach to building out the master plan for Arizona Stadium, which when completed, will house team locker rooms, coaches offices, dining rooms, strength and conditioning workout areas, meeting rooms and loge and luxury boxes, and a concourse on the third level above the end zone seating which will connect the east and west sides of the current structure. Kozachik credits Bryne with adding emphasis to the football program and urgency to the completion of the end zone project.

Major Donations Make Addition Possible

Major gifts to the football program, totaling \$25.5 million, provided 35% of the total cost of the \$72 million project, and allowed the University of Arizona to secure permission from the Arizona Board of Regents to proceed with the project. According to Kozachik, donations are continuing to come into the athletic department, but potential donors are encouraged to contact John Perrin, Senior Associate Director of Athletics, Business Operations at jperrin@arizona.edu or James Francis at jfrancis@arizona.edu.

Recruiting Impact

At the groundbreaking and dedication of the facility in January, new football coach Rich Rodriquez commented on the effect that the new addition has already had on recruiting.

“People have asked me if we are talking to recruits about this expansion, and I say the same thing every time; are you kidding me, everyday! This north end zone project will change the perception in North America of Arizona Football. It sends a message that we are building the best program in the country.”

Rodriquez closed his remarks at the ground breaking ceremony by saying that about 10 or 15 years ago he picked up the phrase; “hold the rope,” meaning that the commitment that each player, coach or staff member would be that if someone were hanging off the edge of a cliff, holding onto a rope for dear life, that everyone on the other end, at the top of

the cliff or mountain would be straining with all their being to hold on for dear life for the person on the other end.

“Now, with this expansion in place, I’ve told our players and coaches that we’ll have to amend the phrase from ‘hold the rope,’ to ‘pull the rope.’”

Current Progress

What the photos show is the current state of the project, including the excavation of a large amount of dirt forming an earthen berm near the north end zone in preparation for the drilling of over 100 caissons, 60 to 100 feet deep and 3 to 6 feet wide. Once filled with hundreds of tons of steel and concrete, these holes will be the foundation of the project.

“Due to the nature of our subsoil – basically hundreds of feet of sand, extensive geological testing was conducted in order to ‘overbuild’ to the seismic needs of the structure,” Kozachik said.

Stadium Capacity

One of the questions many fans have had is how the completed project will impact the final capacity of Arizona Stadium. The former end zone bleachers contained about 5,000 seats and the new facility will add that 5,000 back. So, by the beginning of the 2013 season, capacity will be restored to 57,800. The highest attendance recorded at Arizona Stadium was 59,920 on November 23, 1996, in the rivalry game against Arizona State.

From a competitive standpoint, what will the enclosure mean for sound retention? According to Kozachik, the effect will be minimal.

“It’ll be a marginal change. Remember, we had the big scoreboard and the library kicking sound back into the bowl, so this won’t be a significantly different dynamic.”

Eventually, there will be a new scoreboard of some type in the north end zone, and even though the grandstands will be empty next year, there will have to be some type of equipment in place to signal official time, downs, etcetera, for teams on offense moving south to north.

With the removal of 5,000 bleacher seats, what accommodation is being made for the season ticket holders in that area?

Darren Graessle, Director of Ticketing and Customer Relations for the University of Arizona Athletic Department, said that the ticket office at McKale has been busy contacting the 3,000 season ticket holders in the north end bleachers and offering them season tickets in sections 201, 203-207, located in the upper level, on the east side of the stadium, where there is sufficient space for all who choose to relocate. Both the north end

zone and the upper level east side portions of the stadium are designated “Family” seating areas, offering reduced season ticket pricing.

Additionally, Graessle mentioned that the ticket office has, “more than four times the number of season ticket renewals we had at a comparable time last year.” Last year Arizona had about 24,000 season ticket holders. Graessle expects that number to increase for 2012.

“As soon as Coach Rodriguez was announced as the new head coach, we had an immediate surge of renewals, and we’ve been pretty busy since then.”

Graessle pointed out another significant change due to the expansion on the north end.

“We are adding 800 seats in the south end zone, in sections 11, 12, and 13, basically from east to west, 8 additional rows, at field level. One of the reasons is to provide wheelchair accessibility for those displaced this next year from the north end zone.”

With the new configuration, sellout capacity for Arizona Stadium figures to be in the 53,000 range for the 2012 season. Then the capacity will rise to over 57,000 once again in 2013. That figure however, does not take into account the capacity of the new loge seating and luxury boxes.

The current construction will eventually yield a stadium that will bring Arizona Football into the 21st century. It won’t significantly increase attendance, but it will present a cleaner, modern look and provide facilities for fans, players and coaches that will be competitive in a progressive Pacific-12 conference.

Steve Buchanan is a longtime Arizona football season ticket holder and regular contributor to Wildcat Sports Report’s investigative reporting staff.